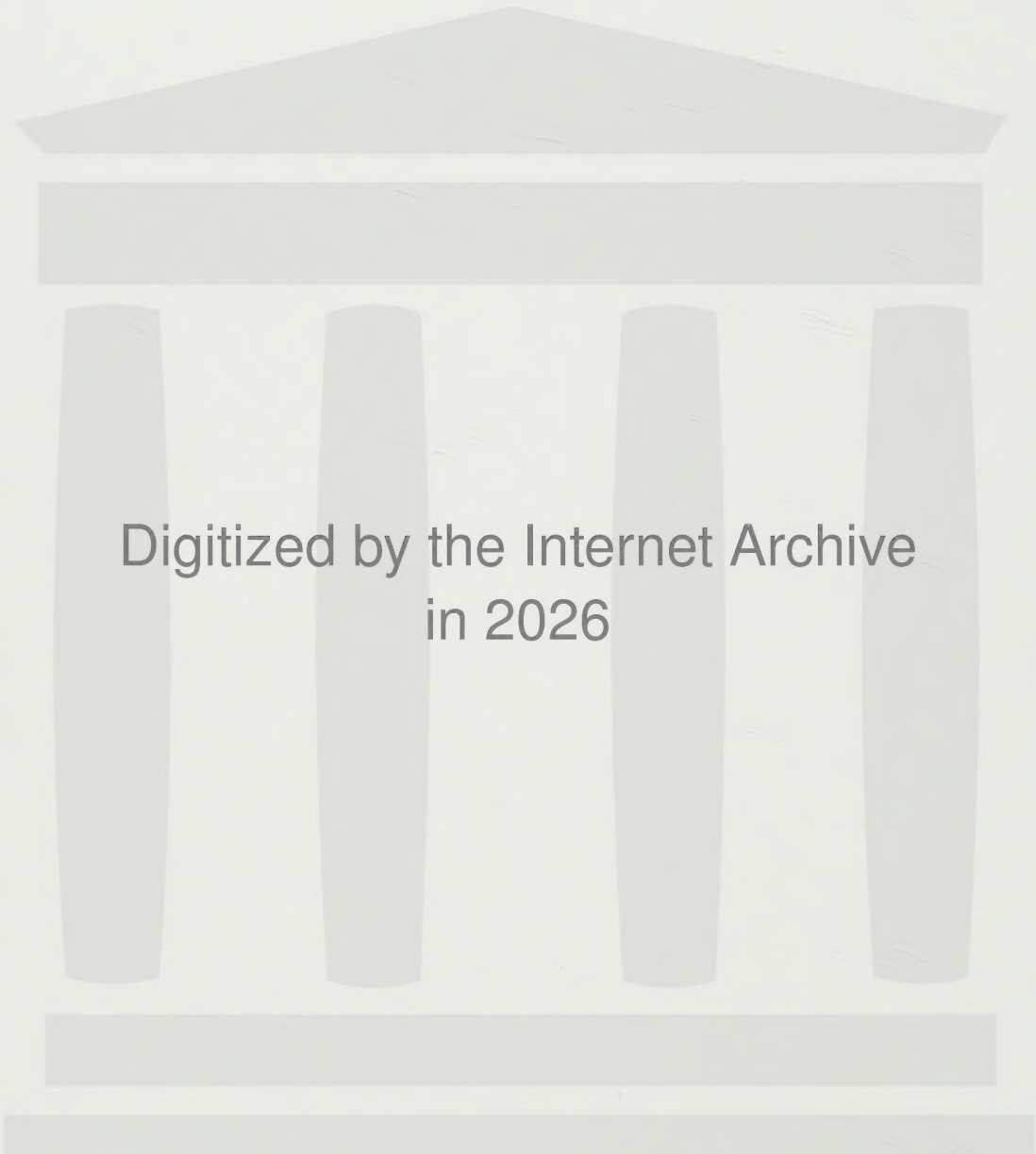
On The Relations Between Spoken And Written Language: With Special Reference To English (1919)

Henry Bradley



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ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *ENGLISH*

By

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SPOKEN AND WRITTEN ENGLISH

MANY of the advocates of spelling reform are in the habit of asserting, as if it were an axiom admitting of no dispute, that the sole function of writing is to represent sounds. It appears to me that this is one of those spurious truisms that are not intelligently believed by any one, but which continue to be repeated because nobody takes the trouble to consider what they really mean. I do not merely deny the truth of the pretended axiom as a description of the relations between speech and writing as they exist at the present day in English and other languages. I assert that, so far as peoples of literary culture are concerned, there never was a time when this formula would have correctly expressed the facts; and that it would still remain false, even if an accurately phonetic spelling had been in universal use for hundreds of years.

In order to understand distinctly the real import of the current statement, it will be well to consider the one case in which it is incontestably correct. A system of musical notation cannot perfectly fulfil its purpose unless it is so constructed that it will enable a competent musician who has mastered the system to know exactly, on looking at a composition written in the notation, what are the sounds which the composer intended his performers to produce. If a piece of written music does not attain this end with a reasonable approximation to correctness, it is useless, and might just as well not exist at all.

Now the assertion that the sole function of writing is to represent sounds amounts to saying that the case of written language is exactly parallel to that of written music. If

this be so, it must follow that unless the written form of an unknown word suffices to convey a fairly correct notion of its pronunciation to a fully instructed reader, then that word might just as well not have been written at all. We shall have to say that a piece of writing is useful in the precise degree in which it is phonetically spelt, and no further. Perhaps no one will venture to say that this statement is in accord with the facts; but unless the current pseudo-axiom means this, I am at a loss to imagine what it *can* mean. The truth is that between written music and written language there is one all-important difference. In written music the representation of sounds is the absolutely ultimate end. In written language it is only a means. We use visible symbols for the sounds of speech because spoken sounds are symbols of meaning. The ultimate end, and for most purposes, though not for all, the only important end, of written language is to convey meaning. Now the degree in which a piece of writing or print is capable of conveying its meaning does not at all necessarily depend on the accuracy with which it suggests the sounds that would have been heard if the composition had been spoken instead of being written. Let us consider an extreme case. It is well known that, in the days before the modern improvements in the teaching of the deaf and dumb, many deaf-mutes were successfully taught to read printed books with understanding, and to express their thoughts intelligibly in writing. For these persons a word was simply a group of visible marks, the direct symbol of an idea. For them, of course, the letters of the alphabet could not possibly be associated with any audible sounds, nor even, as they are for their better trained successors, with movements of the organs of speech. In this case alphabetic writing was a total failure so far as its proxi-

mate end was concerned, and yet for its ultimate purpose it was a complete success. The middle step had simply been jumped over. Now, as I shall show later on, educated persons, gifted with hearing and speech, do in their mental reading constantly perform this very feat of jumping over the middle step. By long habit, they have formed direct associations between certain familiar groups of letters and the meanings which they represent. Their purpose in reading being to arrive at the meaning, they find a quicker way of doing so than that of translating every written word into its audible equivalent. In this fact we shall find the explanation of much that might otherwise seem unaccountable in the history of written language.

It is universally admitted that writing began by being ideographic. The earliest written characters were pictures, which at first stood for the objects depicted, and afterwards became also symbols of qualities, actions, and relations. It is conceivable that if mankind had been all deaf-mutes, they might have developed on this basis a written language as complete and efficient for its purpose as oral speech. But as the peoples that invented writing were already in possession of one elaborate system for the expression of thought (namely, a spoken language), it was in the nature of things impossible that they should take the needless trouble of devising a second system co-extensive with the first and independent of it. Hence the written sign gradually ceased to represent merely an idea, and became the symbol of some one of the various spoken words by which that idea could be expressed. The next step was to let the written sign stand for the *sound* of a spoken word irrespective of its meaning. That is to say, the character which had come to be the symbol of a particular spoken word (i.e. of a certain sequence of sounds

expressing an idea) was now allowed to denote any other words that were pronounced in the same way. Still later, it was found that polysyllabic words for which no symbol existed could be written by splitting them up into syllables that had already acquired their special signs; and new characters were invented to express those syllables which were not separately significant. I cannot now attempt to trace in detail the subsequent steps of the process which ended in the formation of a complete alphabet, in which every elementary sound of a language, so far as the inventor's skill in phonetic analysis could go, was represented by a distinct letter. But the penultimate stage in this development has a peculiar interest.

The western Semitic nations, some thirty centuries ago, had got rid of the ideographic principle in their writing. Their script took account of sound only, not of meaning; moreover, their characters represented not syllables, but simple sound-elements. Their alphabet, however, consisted of consonants only, for the vowels were left unwritten. Even to this day, although vowel-marks have been invented, Arabic is for ordinary purposes nearly always written without them. This implies that the native reader would very often be unable to pronounce a word on the page before him unless he knew its meaning, and that might be determinable only by inference from the after part of the sentence. At first sight, it might appear that reading under these conditions must be a difficult business. But while the ear and mouth, in hearing and pronouncing, can only take the sounds of a word in succession, the eye is capable of surveying a large number of written letters at once. When we ourselves are reading aloud, do we usually look at the several letters of a word in succession, and pronounce them as they come? Not if

the word is one that we are acquainted with. The group of letters, seen as a whole, enables us to identify the word intended, and having thus identified it we pronounce it from habit. Even if the word is quite new to us—a proper name, for instance—the syllable, rather than the letter, is the unit present to consciousness. Hence it is that when a word is misprinted, we often read it as the author intended without being aware of the misprint.[1] Further, those who are in the habit of reading a great deal of some particular kind of technical literature will admit that very often a familiar and unambiguous abbreviation is more quickly read than the word would be if written in full. The reason is that a mere hint is enough to enable us to identify the word intended by the writer, and the single letter requires less effort to apprehend than the group of letters. Many mediaeval Latin MSS. are written with nearly every word abbreviated. We rightly judge that it must have required an arduous training to enable a man to read rapidly a text written in this fashion, and when writing to hit always on the proper contraction without an instant's hesitation. Nevertheless, I am convinced that in the Middle Ages a man who had mastered the art of reading abbreviated MSS., and seldom saw any others, would find the contractions no hindrance, but a help to rapidity of reading. However this may be, it is certain that to an accomplished reader it does not, except in rare instances, matter a jot whether his native language is phonetically spelt or not; what is important to him is that the group

[1] Many years ago, I saw in a newspaper an announcement of a person's death, with the startling addition, 'Fiends will kindly accept this intimation'. I cut out the paragraph, mounted it on a card, and showed it to a large number of persons, who all read it over several times without detecting anything wrong in it.

of letters before him shall be that which habit has led him to associate with a certain word. An unphonetic system of spelling, however, is liable to have one fault which may on occasion give trouble to even the most practised reader. This fault, which may be called phonetic ambiguity, consists in the use of one and the same group of letters to represent two words that differ in pronunciation. A system of spelling might be very far from being phonetically accurate without having this particular defect; but our traditional English orthography has it in a very marked degree.[1] That the past tense of the verb *to read* is spelt the same as the present tense, though pronounced differently; that *bow* may be either (bau) or (bōu); that *lead* may be either the verb (līd) or the name of the metal (led)—these anomalies, and many others like them, put us back into the predicament of the Arab, who has to survey the whole sentence before he can pronounce its component words. The grievance is not, perhaps, very severely felt by us, any more than it is by the Arab, because the trained eye and mind have acquired the power of taking in a whole series of written words at a glance. Nevertheless, the sternest of orthographical conservatives can hardly deny that—apart from all regard to the difficulties of the learner—this particular feature of English spelling ought if possible to be reformed.

The main reason why a system of writing that represents the sounds of the spoken language is better than the primitive ideographic system is that it is so enormously easier to learn. It has no doubt some other advantages also. But sometimes an ideograph is able to convey its

[1] This fault has not been altogether avoided in the system proposed by the London Simplified Spelling Society, which writes 'cwiet' for *quiet* and *quite*, and 'loeth' for *loth* and *loathe*.

meaning far more quickly and effectively than words can. We still use certain ideographs with manifest advantage. If a number extending to millions is expressed in words, we find it helpful to write it down in figures to get a better notion of it. The letters and signs of algebra are ideographs, and the science could not have come into existence at all if words had had to be used instead of them. Now because the need has been felt for a more direct method of symbolizing thought than that which phonetic writing supplies, it has come to pass that the written languages of Europe, which were once purely phonetic, are now to a certain extent ideographic.

This statement may perhaps seem difficult to understand. The following remarks will, I hope, make it clear. When we read mentally for our own information, we do not usually, as children do, go through the process of imagining the sound of each word, and then translating the sound into meaning. In many cases the habit of much reading has established for us a direct association between the aspect of a written word and its meaning. I have sometimes tried, after rapidly reading a page of print, to discover as well as I could what had been in my consciousness during the process. Such introspection is difficult, and one must not be too sure of the truth of its results. However, what I seem to find is something like this. Many of the words have conveyed to my mind simply the notion of their meaning, unaccompanied by any sound-picture at all; others have been distinctly heard by my mental ear; and of many words phonetic fragments have presented themselves, partly in the form of mentally heard sounds, partly in that of imagined movements of the organs of speech. In general, when a word denotes a visual object or an acute physical sensation, the meaning is the thing

that I am conscious of first. If I receive a letter beginning 'My *deer* Sir', I have seen a vision of a horned animal before my mental ear has perceived the sound of the word. The experience of other people in these matters may be different to some extent from mine. But I think most practised readers will agree that for them also many written words have become direct symbols of their meanings. Further, I do not suppose that I am alone in finding in the visible aspect of many words a sort of physiognomic effect, which in my case is sometimes rather annoyingly inappropriate to their meaning. A curious illustration of this point occurs to me. Some years ago, a circular was addressed, in the interests of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to a large number of persons, asking whether they thought the word *grey* should be spelt with an *a* or an *e*. Many of the replies, especially those from artists, were to the effect that the writers apprehended *grey* and *gray* as different words, denoting different varieties of colour.

In the preceding paragraph I have tried to show that systems of writing that were originally phonetic tend to become ideographic with regard to their *use* or *function*. I wish now to point out further that the cultivated written languages of Europe have all become partly ideographic also with regard to their *structure*. That is, they include features which are phonetically useless—which convey no information relating to sound—but which are valued because they make the meaning clearer. Such are our use of initial capitals to distinguish proper names and the like; quotation marks; the apostrophe used to show that a sound which is part of our notion of a word is omitted in pronunciation; and the apostrophe (indefensible on any other ground than convenience) which is put

before the *s* of the possessive singular and after the *s* of the possessive plural. Most people will admit that these devices have their use; but some reformers, faithful to their principle that writing exists only to represent sound, tell us that if they were abolished we should soon learn to do without them. Which may be quite true, but does not prove that we should not be any the worse off.

But this is not all. In English, French, and other languages, there are many pairs of words of differing meaning, which were once pronounced differently and written phonetically, but have come to be alike in sound. Now because to the ordinary person it is more important that a written word should quickly and surely suggest its meaning than that it should express its sound, the old spelling has been allowed to remain unaltered. The difference of spelling, once phonetically significant, has become a mere ideographic device. Thus written English makes a distinction between the like-sounding words which occur in such sentences as these:

Phaethon was the son of the Sun.
The hair of the hare is commonly called fur.
The poor man had hidden the whole of his savings in a hole in his wall.
The knight spent the night in prayer.
Are the roads in Rhodes good?
We rode to the side of the lake and then rowed across.
Send these boots to the cobbler to be soled, and the others to the auctioneer to be sold.

Sentences of this kind might be multiplied indefinitely. It is true that in these particular contexts the spoken words are not ambiguous; I had to devise examples that could be read aloud without explanation. But it quite often

happens that words are used in writing without any fear of misunderstanding, though if the passage were read aloud the hearer would misapprehend or be puzzled. A newspaper says that somebody has invented a new sowing-machine; the reader understands at once, but the hearer does not, that it is an agricultural implement. I once heard quoted the statement that Trafalgar Square is the finest sight (or site) in London. Whether the word meant 'spectacle' or 'situation' I cannot guess. The 'rights (or rites) of the Church' and 'matrimonial rights (or rites)' are expressions that are unambiguous in print, but may bear two different meanings when spoken; and I have known them used in contexts which left the choice of interpretation open. In writing or in print, I may safely refer to 'my two ingenious friends', meaning 'my two friends who are ingenious'; if I do so in a speech or in conversation, I may be taken to mean 'my friends who are too ingenious'. In a work on trigonometry I find a sentence containing the word *sine* and also the word *sign* in its mathematical sense; this causes no difficulty to the reader, but in an oral lecture the sentence would be quite unintelligible. If I read that Mr. So-and-so is a flower-merchant, I am in no danger of supposing (as I should if I merely *heard* the statement) that he deals in the material of my daily bread.[1] A distinguished poet has used the expression 'my knightly task'; the silent *k* makes his meaning clear, but when the poem is recited

[1] It may be replied that *flour* is a monosyllable and *flower* a disyllable. Some people are careful to make this useful distinction of pronunciation, but it originated as the interpretation of an arbitrary distinction in spelling. The two words are not distinguished in *Johnson's Dictionary* (1755), where 'the finest part of meal' appears as one of the senses of *flower*. Those 'spelling-pronunciations', which some philologists treat with such fierce contempt, really have their use sometimes!

the hearer may be excused if he misunderstands. The compiler of a concise vocabulary of a foreign language can use, without risk of being misunderstood, such brief renderings as 'son', 'sun', 'knight', 'night', 'oar', 'ore', 'hair', 'hare,' 'to dye', 'to die', 'to sow', 'to sew', 'to rain', and 'to reign'. If English were written phonetically, he would have to add explanations.

Now there can be no reasonable doubt that the graphic differentiation of homophones does, so far as it goes, render written English a better instrument of expression than spoken English. It is not merely that the written language is not liable to those actual misunderstandings that sometimes occur in conversation, and are oftener avoided by awkward shifts. Even when no misunderstanding is possible, it is an advantage not to be disturbed in our mental reading by obscure suggestions of irrelevant meanings. It is because the expression of meaning is felt to be the real purpose of written language that these distinctions still survive, in spite of the disastrous effect that they have had on the phonetic intelligibility of written words.

The pressure of the ideographic need, as we may call it, explains many things that are often thought extraordinary in the history of English spelling. At one time the past tense of *miss* was often spelt phonetically *mist*. The unphonetic spelling *missed* has been re-established. Why? 'Sheer perversity', says the ardent spelling reformer. But mankind do not make changes out of sheer perversity, but because they somehow feel them to be convenient. In this case *miss* is the accustomed symbol for a certain verbal concept, and *ed* for the notion of past tense. When the two symbols are put together unaltered, the combined meaning is more vividly suggested than it

is by the phonetic spelling, which moreover is associated with a different word. Perhaps even such pedantic freaks as the etymological spelling of *debt* and *doubt*, or even the pseudo-etymological spelling of *scissors*, may not originally have been without some utilitarian excuse. In an age when educated Englishmen read and wrote more Latin than English, a spelling that suggested a Latin word of cognate meaning may very well have been helpful to rapid apprehension of the import of the written word. It is a recognized defect of English (as compared with Greek or German) that the words that are related in meaning are so often unrelated in form: that, for instance, our only adjectives corresponding to the nouns *house* and *mind* are *domestic* and *mental*, and our only noun corresponding to the verb *to owe* is *debt*. For the educated Englishman of the sixteenth century, this weakness in his native language was partly compensated for through his familiarity with Latin, and he may have found that certain English words gained in expressive force by a spelling that brought them into visible association with their real or supposed originals in the learned language with which he was so much at home. Although, however, we may admit that the 'pedantic' spellings of the sixteenth century once served a useful purpose, it does not follow that we ought to perpetuate them now that the conditions which gave them their value no longer exist.[1]

We have now shown that, in consequence of our

[1] It is certainly absurd that we should go on writing *victual* when we pronounce 'vit'l'. I suspect, however, that the man who first wrote *victual* did not intend it for an improved spelling of *vittal*, but for a new word, which was to supersede, in pronunciation as well as in writing, what he regarded as a vulgar corruption. If so, he succeeded only in half his enterprise.

common practice of reading without thoroughgoing translation into sound, written language has to a great extent become an instrument for the direct expression of meaning, co-ordinate with audible language. The result of this has been that the written language has in part been developed on lines of its own, independent of the development of oral speech. It is true that the two are closely correlated: every spoken word, theoretically at least, has its proper spelling, and every written word its proper pronunciation. But in all cultivated nations the literary vocabulary is, for obvious reasons, vastly more extensive than the vocabulary of conversation; it has a great number of words that are used almost exclusively in writing. In German, the majority of these words are compounds or derivatives of popular words, and therefore every German has some notion of at least their *literal* meaning. In English it is far otherwise, owing to the abundance of words taken from Latin and Greek. For centuries, many of our English writers have been classically educated, and have written chiefly for classically educated readers. Hence they have not scrupled, when they wanted a word to express their meaning, to invent one by anglicizing a Greek or Latin word, or by forming a derivative from it, or, again, by making a new Greek or Latin compound, and then anglicizing that; assuming that the reader would at once recognize the intended meaning from the etymology. (Let me here remark that although I am sometimes called an optimist in my views of the excellence of the English language, I do consider that the results of this practice are deplorable.) Now observe that for us moderns a Greek or Latin word is primarily a succession of letters of the alphabet, not a succession of sounds. True, we do pronounce it, after

a fashion; but still we feel that the essential thing is the written form, not the spoken one. Hence, the great mass of English derivatives from Greek and Latin have originated in the following curious way. The group of letters constituting a Latin word, or a new-made Latin compound, has been taken into written English, and provided with an English termination; or the group of letters forming a Greek word or new-made Greek compound is transliterated as the Romans would have done it, and then an English written word is made out of the result of this operation. When we are reading aloud, we have to pronounce these words somehow, and there are certain broad rules for doing this; but the rules are somewhat vague and uncertain, so that different people pronounce the word differently. This is not felt to matter very much; the fact being that for these words the normal relation between alphabetic writing and speech is simply reversed: the group of letters is the real word, and the pronunciation merely its symbol.[1] When once in a way we hear such a word spoken, our thought flies to its customary spelling, and perhaps from that to some Greek or Latin written word, and then we perceive its meaning.

The number of these primarily graphic words has been enormously increased of late years, and is increasing every day, because of the growth of a scientific terminology derived from Greek. The scientist does not usually concern himself much about the pronunciation of his own coinages. He does not even take care to avoid phonetic identity with some existing term. We thus get such

[1] It would be correct, as far as this class of words is concerned, to say that the written form is the direct symbol of thought, that the pronunciation is the symbol of this symbol, and that the written representation of the pronunciation is a symbol of a symbol of a symbol!

awkward pairs of words as *psychosis* and *sycosis*, which mean very different things, but are commonly pronounced alike. The adjectives *cirrhous* and *scirrhous* describe two different morbid conditions of the liver. It has actually happened that a man of science, when asked by a lexicographer how a word of his own invention should be pronounced, has replied that it was the lexicographer's business to settle that question. It may be remarked that most of these newly-formed terms have international currency: a foreign scientist, reading an English book on his own subject, needs no dictionary for most of the technical words, because they are spelt nearly in the same way as those of his own language. If we were to adopt phonetic spelling for these words, he would often have first to pronounce them, and then render their pronunciation back into its original, the obsolete spelling, before he could understand them.[1]

It is a curious fact that the formation of English derivatives from proper names familiar to everybody often takes place through the medium of the spelling. The names Canada and Bacon are known even to illiterate people; but the adjectives relating to Canada and Bacon are not derived from these words as spoken; if they were, they would be pronounced *kæ'nədiən* and *bei'kniən*. They are

[1] Although I disbelieve in the value of artificial languages for the purposes of literature, I think it not impossible, and certainly much to be desired, that a time may come when all European works of abstruse science will be written in some as yet unborn successor of Esperanto or Ido. At present our English dictionaries are burdened with an enormous and daily increasing mass of scientific terms that are not English at all except in the form of their terminations and in the pronunciations inferred from their spelling. The adoption of an international language for science would bring about the disappearance of these monstrosities of un-English English, and thus remove one of the great obstacles in the way of spelling reform.

formed by taking the six letters that spell Canada, and the five that spell Bacon, and then tacking on to them the letters *ian*. We pronounce the resulting written words according to rules ultimately originating in our traditional mispronunciation of Latin. Anybody who can read sees at once how the adjectives are formed, and probably thinks the process quite natural. An illiterate person, or one who knew nothing but phonetic spelling, would be utterly unable to see any connexion between the adjectives and the proper names.

But the dependence of the oral on the written language extends to other derivatives than those of proper names. Our etymological dictionaries tell us, for instance, that *criticize* is 'from *critic* + *-ize*'. This information is quite correct, and there is no reason for calling it insufficient. But in a dictionary written in phonetic spelling for the use of students unacquainted with the traditional orthography, the statement that *kritisaiz* is 'from *kritik* + *aiz*' would be obviously defective. The student would ask why the final *k* of *kritik* should change into *s* when the suffix *-aiz* was appended. The answer would be too voluminous to be given in the article on the verb; there would have to be a reference to the section of the etymological introduction in which all similar cases would be dealt with. And the explanation would be to the effect that this change of *k* into *s* was not due to any phonetic law of the English language; that such words as *kritisaiz* were formed not in speech but in writing (or with a view to their written form), in the days when the English used an alphabet in which the character *c* stood for the sound *k* when final, but for the sound *s* when followed by the character *i*; and that these words could not have been formed at all (in their existing phonetic shape) if English

had always been a spoken language merely, or had always been written phonetically. Again, look at the words *rhetorical* and *rhetorician*. Just because we know how to read, we think the relation between them is obvious and simple. Why, they are quite alike except in the last two or three letters. It is difficult to put ourselves 'in the room of the unlearned', whose ear will not tell him that the two words are connected at all. They have in common the consonant-sequence *r-t-r*, but that similarity is obscured by the difference in vowels and in incidence of stress. The conclusion of this whole matter is that while in ancient Greek (for instance) the processes of derivation are exactly what they would have been if writing had never existed, in modern English these processes cannot be fully accounted for without reference to the history of the written language. This proposition nobody will deny, but many philologists have failed to appreciate its full importance.

I have dwelt much on the fact that in the silent reading that fills up so much of the time of most people nowadays, it matters little for the most part whether we mentally pronounce the words or not. When, however, we are reading poetry, or any kind of prose that depends for its effect on euphony or phonetic expressiveness, our appreciation will be very imperfect unless we either pronounce the words audibly or imagine their sound. We find, accordingly, that many poets have shown some leaning to phonetic improvements in spelling. They have good reason for this. It is true, as I have shown, that an unphonetic spelling does not lead a practised reader to mispronounce; but the half-conscious suggestion of a wrong pronunciation that it calls up may be enough to disturb the clearness of mental hearing. At the same

time, poets of literary culture are apt to be very sensitive to the traditional associations and visual symbolism of written forms, and hence their advocacy of phonetic spelling is seldom uncompromisingly thorough. In the line of *The Princess*,

Nor burnt the grange, nor buss'd the milking-maid,

Tennyson was careful to substitute an apostrophe for the silent *e* of *bussed*. But it is not easy to imagine that he would have consented to write the word as 'bust', or that he would have been delighted with the Simplified Spelling Society's rendering of a line of *In Memoriam* as 'This truuth caim born bi beer and paul'. It would be well, I think, if custom allowed to poets a greater degree of freedom to spell words according to their own taste. I feel sure that some of the poets of the nineteenth century, if they had not been afraid of shocking the prejudices of their readers, would gladly have availed themselves of orthographical licences as a means of adding to their resources of expression, and that the results would often have been very interesting. In this connexion it may be appropriate to remark that the habit of mental reading for meaning only is likely, unless efforts are made to counteract its effect, greatly to impair our capacity for appreciating the beauty of verse and of elevated prose style.

The object of this paper would be seriously misapprehended if it were supposed to be primarily concerned with the question of the reform of English spelling. My chief aim has been to discover and set forth, to the best of my ability, the nature of the relations that exist between spoken and written language in general, and between spoken and written English in particular. The subject

is to me full of interest as a part of the science of language, and that interest would be but little diminished if the spelling-reform controversy did not exist. At the same time, it is almost impossible to lay down any proposition with regard to the relations between written and spoken English that does not obviously involve some inference as to the merits and defects of the traditional orthography, or the magnitude of the difficulties in the way of any attempt to improve it. The general tendency of what I have said with regard to these points is to show that the existing ('partly ideographic') spelling, *for those who are thoroughly familiar with it*, fulfils the chief end of written language better than a purely phonetic system if equally familiar could fulfil it; and that (owing to certain peculiar conditions of the English language) the temporary practical inconveniences attendant on *any* extensive change, and, consequently, the difficulties of procuring acceptance for even beneficial reforms, are far greater than is often supposed.

The preceding discussion, however, has entirely ignored one consideration that is of the utmost importance. There is no doubt that those unphonetic features of our spelling, which have their practical value for the educated adult, do add enormously to the difficulty of learning to read and write. The waste of time in education caused by the want of consistent relation between the written and the spoken word is a serious evil, which urgently calls for a remedy. After all, it is the interest of the learner, not that of the person who has mastered all the difficulties, that has the first claim to consideration.

Now there are many who think that nothing will greatly lessen the difficulties of the learner short of the adoption of a purely phonetic system—not necessarily a system in

which each letter would stand for one and only one elementary sound, but at any rate one in which, by the help of a few simple rules, the spelling of any word could be inferred with approximate correctness from its pronunciation, and *vice versa*. These persons maintain that the gain resulting from such a reform would greatly exceed the loss (which some of them admit to be considerable); and that the difficulty of procuring acceptance for it, although enormous, is not insuperable. If only I were convinced that these views are correct, I should feel bound to range myself on the side of the advocates of radical reform. But I have already indicated that I regard radical reform as impracticable; and I believe, further, that the difficulties of the learner can be greatly relieved by more moderate measures, which, though they will have to encounter formidable obstacles, might be carried into effect by wisely-directed effort. To argue this last point would carry me too far away from the purpose I have had in view. But it falls strictly within the limits of my subject to inquire what would be the effect on the English language if phonetic spelling were to be adopted. If it be said that on my own principles such a discussion is void of practical interest, I may reply, first, that from the purely scientific point of view it may have its value, as affording further illustration of the relations between speech and writing; and, secondly, that, as I do not claim to be infallible, I cannot undertake to say that some unforeseen conjuncture of circumstances may not some day bring about a change which at present seems outside the range of possibility.

I am aware that in speaking of the effect that a phonetic reform would be likely to have on the English language, I am running counter to the common assertion of spelling

reformers, that changes in spelling affect only the mode of representation of the language, and have nothing to do with the language itself. This assertion seems to me to rest on an altogether superficial view of the facts. If it be true, as I have shown, that the English language (chiefly, indeed, but not quite exclusively, literary English) is to a considerable extent the creature of its written form, it follows that an extensive change in the written form cannot leave the substance of the language unaltered. The substitution of phonetic spelling for the received system would, I am persuaded, very seriously modify the character of the English vocabulary. It may, perhaps, excite surprise when I add that the ultimate effect of the change, so far as it is capable of being foreseen, would in certain respects be for good. I do not pretend that I should look forward with entire complacency to a change which must hasten the coming of the time when the literature of to-day and of earlier days will be intelligible, untranslated, only to philologists; but I think it likely that if phonetic spelling be adopted, the English language, when it emerges from the period of confusion which the alteration must bring in, will have been freed from some of its most prominent defects.

We have seen that one notable weakness of spoken English is the multitude of words that are pronounced alike but differ in meaning. The partial freedom of the written language from this fault is in itself a good thing; but it tends to perpetuate the evil by rendering it more tolerable. With educated people, the utterance of a word is usually accompanied by some obscure reminiscence of its spelling; their notion of the word is a blend of its audible and its visible form. Hence, when two words of the same sound happen to be distinguished in spelling,

we are often imperfectly conscious of their identity to the ear. From this cause, writers and speakers often fall unawares into, or do not feel it worth while to avoid, equivoques that would have a strange effect if the language were purely oral or phonetically written. For the same reason, the reader seldom observes these ambiguities at all, and even the hearer is ordinarily very tolerant of them; but sometimes they are too ludicrous to escape notice. There are many current stories, authentic and otherwise, that might be quoted in illustration of this point. Probably it is only a fiction that a book of travel was once offered to a publisher, bearing the title, 'Hallowed Spots of Greece'. But it is a well-attested fact that a distinguished orator did, to his own great annoyance, excite the laughter of an Oxford audience by saying, 'We must consider Oxford as a whole; and *what* a whole it is!' Now oral language, when the influence of writing does not interfere, shows a tendency to free itself from such homophones as often cause inconvenience. When *queen* and *quean* came to be pronounced alike, it was inevitable that the latter should become obsolete as a spoken word. It is still now and then used as a literary archaism; but when phonetic spelling is established it will wholly disappear from the language, and if the books that contain it are reprinted in the new orthography it will require a footnote. Very often, where two words of like sound are freely used in literature, it will be found that only one of them survives in speech. And even when both words are colloquially familiar in educated use, the illiterate classes have replaced one of them by some synonym. It is a curious fact that such an apparently indispensable word as *son* has ceased to be vernacular in the dialects of many parts of England, although *daughter* is in everyday

use. The speaker of pure dialect understands it as a word belonging to the language of the educated, but to employ it in ordinary talk would be deemed an affectation. In some dialects *son* is, as I learn from Professor Wright's *Dialect Grammar*, § 101, distinguished from *sun* by an abnormal pronunciation based on the spelling. I would not venture to assert that the identity of sound with *sun* is the only cause that has led to the widespread disuse of *son* in dialect speech, but I think it has certainly contributed to the result.

These considerations seem to show that, if phonetic spelling ever comes to be adopted, it will in time have the effect of freeing spoken English from many of its ambiguities. And even from the beginning, it will compel English writers to be more careful than they have been to avoid the use of expressions that would be obscure, or suggestive of ludicrously irrelevant ideas, if read aloud. The punster, it may be remarked in passing, will find his opportunities greatly restricted. The late William James somewhere speaks of certain tendencies having been 'not only dammed up, but damned up'; and a Roman Catholic newspaper lately headed an article with the words, 'Know Popery'. Under the reign of phonetic spelling such freaks as these would become impossible.

Inasmuch as the chief cause of the production of homophones is phonetic change, and this process is constantly going on, we may expect that many words that are now different in sound will some day be pronounced alike. The influence of the written language, even at present, is some check on the rapidity of change of pronunciation. What are called 'spelling-pronunciations' (the bugbear of pedantic phoneticians) have often come into general use, with the result of restoring valuable

distinctions which the language had lost. The beneficial conservative influence of orthography would be greatly increased by a change that would make it possible to appeal to the spelling of a word as the standard of its correct pronunciation.

There is yet another respect in which the reform of English spelling on phonetic principles would have a powerful, and in the end beneficial, effect on the language. One of the gravest faults of English is what Jespersen has aptly called the 'undemocratic' character of a large part of its literary vocabulary. A vast number of the words that are freely used in literature are alien to the speech of the multitude, and fully intelligible only to those who are familiar with the import of the Latin or Greek words from which they are formed. As I have already shown, these 'undemocratic' terms belong primarily to the written language: it is on the resemblance of their customary written form to the written form of Latin or Greek words that their mental effect depends. If their spelling were materially changed, the motive for using them would be gone, and multitudes of them would become obsolete. Undoubtedly much temporary inconvenience would result; where writer and reader are both classically educated, words of this sort are often, by virtue of the literary reminiscences they suggest, far more effective than any substitutes could be. Yet the use of such words, and still more the practice of inventing them freely for occasional needs, is a symptom of disease. A language is not in a healthy condition when a large part of its literary vocabulary can be perfectly understood only by the aid of foreign tongues. The universal adoption of phonetic spelling would do something to free our language from its unnatural bondage to the alien, to compel the

development of its native resources, and to revive its decayed powers of composition and derivation.

It has not been commonly urged among the arguments for phonetic spelling that it will bring in its train a reform of the English language. And, indeed, the argument would be a dangerous one. For the direct operation of the change would consist solely in demolition, which would create needs that would have to be supplied by reconstruction. Perhaps our remote posterity might find cause to crown with flowers the statues of the spelling reformers of to-day; but the lot of the generations between would not in all things be enviable.

It may be that there are tendencies at work that will bring about the supersession of the present literary vocabulary by one that will rest on the sound foundation of the oral vernacular. If so, the time may come when the spelling of English can, with no loss but with abundant gain, be brought into perfect accord with its pronunciation.

In conclusion, I will briefly summarize the chief propositions maintained in this paper.

1. Speech and writing are two organs for the expression of meaning, originally co-ordinate and mutually independent.

2. This dual system involved an intolerable burden on the memory. It was needful that the two organs should be put into mutual relation, so that the spoken and the written symbol of every idea could be inferred each from the other. This ideal could be realized only through phonetic spelling: by making writing the bondslave of speech.

3. But writing, in its primitive freedom, was in some ways a better organ than speech. The eye perceives symbols simultaneously; the ear perceives sounds only

in succession. Mental reading was thus a quicker process than hearing. Besides, the ideograph sometimes conveyed its meaning more vividly than the spoken word.

4. Writing, when enslaved to speech, lost these advantages. But even when a language continues to be phonetically written, the practised reader contrives, during the process of silent reading, to loosen the fetters in which the slave is bound. He acquires the habit of forgetting for the moment the phonetic value of the letters, and using the written word as an unanalysed symbol of the spoken word, and sometimes as a pure ideograph. For him, writing tends to revert to its primitive function of directly expressing meaning.[1]

5. Hence, when a language undergoes change of pronunciation, the old spelling, now become phonetically incorrect, is often retained. In the mind of the man accustomed to reading, the written form becomes part of the essence of a word. For him the best spelling of a word is the usual one, because it enables him most quickly to identify the word, and has acquired direct association with its meaning. It does not matter to him that the individual letters do not correspond to the individual sounds of which the words are composed. And when change of pronunciation has made a spoken word ambiguous, the retention of the old unequivocal written form is a great practical convenience. It makes the written language, so far, a better instrument of expression than the spoken language.

6. The great purpose of written language is to convey meaning. Under modern conditions, it does this by two different processes, inextricably combined; by suggesting

[1] One might almost say that writing retains a grateful memory of its earlier days: it hankers after 'the fleshpots of Egypt'.

words of the spoken tongue, and by recalling the associations which habit has attached to the written form of words. As to the former point, it is the spoken word *as a whole* that is significant; and this is suggested more quickly by a familiar written form than by an unfamiliar one, even though phonetically more accurate. If we bear these things in mind, we shall cease to regard the history of English spelling as a story of nothing but blundering and stupid and indolent conservatism.

7. Among peoples in which many persons write and read much more than they speak and hear, the written language tends to develop more or less independently of the spoken language. In English, owing to historical causes, this process has gone farther than in other languages, so that we have the unique phenomenon of a literary vocabulary of which a large part has no connexion with the oral vernacular, but has been developed in writing by the process of transcribing the written forms of words of foreign languages. Many of the words so formed have come into popular oral use, but a vast number of them are hardly ever pronounced except in reading aloud.

8. Owing partly to this strange inversion of the normal relation between speech and alphabetic writing, and partly to the abundance of homophones in the language, English is far more unsuited than other European tongues to be written phonetically.

NOTE ON SPELLING REFORM

For many persons, the sole interest of the questions discussed in the foregoing paper lies in their possible bearing on the problem of the reform of English spelling. I must therefore expect to meet with adverse criticism on the ground that my own attitude with regard to this problem has not been indicated with sufficient distinctness. It will, indeed, be evident to every reader that I am opposed to any radical change based on purely phonetic principles; and, on the other hand, I have expressed my conviction that our existing system urgently needs improvement. But it may be complained that I have not given any notion of the extent of the changes that I desire to see introduced, nor pointed out any plan for meeting the enormous difficulties which (as my whole argument has shown) stand in the way of procuring acceptance for any extensive scheme of reform.

Now I must confess that my views as to what may ultimately be possible and desirable in the way of reform are exceedingly vague, and I see no use in attempting to render them more definite. The right policy for reformers is at first to confine the attack to those points of the present system for which there is no defence but custom. They will find it quite hard enough to secure acceptance for unquestionable improvements, without adding to their difficulties by prematurely insisting on reforms that promise merely a doubtful balance of gain over loss. A permanently satisfactory system of orthography must be a compromise between conflicting needs, and must be a growth rather than an invention. When a real victory is gained in the first stage, lessons will have been learned that will make it easier to see in what direction our subsequent efforts are most likely to be successful.

Much depends on beginning at the right place. If we were to say that the first reforms to be attempted are those which, if accomplished, would give the greatest measure of relief,

the consequence would be that we must begin with proper names. The unphonetic spelling of surnames and place-names causes constant trouble and annoyance to all of us, even to those whom the other anomalies of English spelling do not inconvenience at all. But it is just here that reform is most evidently impossible; so evidently, that the London Simplified Spelling Society (whose scheme, though far from being accurately phonetic, aims at subjecting the orthography of every English word to exceptionless rules) has decided to leave the customary spelling of all proper names unaltered. The reason is unmistakable. A proper name obviously consists of a particular set of sounds and a particular written form. If the spelling is altered, the identity of the name is (usually) destroyed. To speak only of surnames, Spenser and Spencer, Gray and Grey, Phipps and Fipps, Cholmondeley and Chumley, Wild, Wilde, Wyld, and Wylde are distinct names, denoting different sets of persons. Although it is in proper names that the practical inconvenience of unphonetic spelling is at its worst, the reformer cannot meddle with them without doing more mischief than good.

For very similar reasons, those literary and scientific words which have no oral currency—which are hardly ever pronounced, though widely known in their written form—ought, in the main, to retain their present spelling unaltered.[1] A few general improvements, such as the dropping of the misleading silent *e* in the suffix *-ive*, may be adopted with advantage. But for many of our literary and scientific words it is a reform of pronunciation, and not of spelling, that is really needed. Sir James Murray has ventured to recommend that an effort should be made to restore the pronunciation of the *þ* in the

[1] It is, for the most part, not in these words that the greatest difficulties of our spelling consist. The uneducated, no doubt, often blunder over them; but to persons unaccustomed to mental effort, unfamiliar polysyllables would continue to give trouble even if they were spelt phonetically.

initial combination *ps*.[1] I believe the counsel to be good, and there are probably other points in which the same principle might be usefully applied.

Spelling reform, therefore, must in the main be confined to the words that are primarily oral; and even with regard to these, the existing distinctions between homophones must be preserved. Subject to this restriction, it is desirable that the spelling of all primarily oral words should represent the pronunciation as correctly as the general structure of the traditional orthography will permit. It must be remembered, however, that the pronunciation of educated speakers is not uniform. A mode of spelling which is correctly phonetic for the Londoner, who makes no difference in sound between *lord* and *laud*, *court* and *caught*, *morning* and *mourning*, will be unphonetic for perhaps nine-tenths of the English-speaking world. A reformed spelling for general use, so far as it attempts to be phonetic, must provide for all traditional distinctions of sound that are still preserved by educated speakers of the language anywhere. Those whose speech confuses sounds that other educated speakers keep apart must submit to the inconvenience of using an orthography which renders one sound by different symbols, which they are not allowed to treat as interchangeable.

The reform that is most imperatively needed is one which will ensure that no two English words that are differently pronounced shall be spelt alike. There can be no sufficient excuse for the retention of the many spellings which are *more* ambiguous than the spoken forms of the words. The task of rectifying these anomalies, and of making the many readjustments which their correction will render necessary, will require great ingenuity and thought. The solution of this

[1] This counsel was intended to apply only to such literary and scientific words as have no independent currency in the spoken language. It would be as absurd to pronounce the *p* in *psalm* as to pronounce the *l*. Some reviewers (perhaps excusably) have misunderstood me on this point.

problem, in a manner likely to be generally satisfactory, should be the first object to occupy attention.

It is not easy to devise any effective means of inducing the public to accept even the limited scheme of reform which I have outlined. The disturbing effect of unfamiliar spelling on the reader is greater than is often supposed. I myself, though the nature of my work has made me more at home than most people with the orthography of former periods of English, find that when I read a philological work in which reformed spelling is used I am somewhat less quick in apprehending the force of an argument or the import of a statement than if the book were written in the accustomed way. The ordinary reader will certainly be disposed to turn away from a book which is full of words that seem to him to be grotesquely spelt. (He may sometimes find the oddities amusing, but they will divert his attention from the substance of the writing, and will soon cease to attract.) An author, whether he is one who has something that he wishes to tell the world, or one who lives by his writings, will not willingly limit the circle of his readers by indulging in orthographical eccentricities. It is noteworthy that even Professor Skeat, one of the most impassioned advocates of reformed spelling, seems never, in his published writings, to have ventured to spell any single word otherwise than in the conventional fashion, nor, if I may judge from his many letters to me, did he do so in his correspondence. It would be interesting to know how many of the members of the Simplified Spelling Society make much practical use of the 'simplified spelling'. Perhaps, if the advocates of reform would abandon their far-reaching and impracticable schemes, and come to agreement on a few proposals worthy of immediate adoption, they might be able to induce one or two influential newspapers to use the amended orthography. If this could be done, the new forms would soon become familiar to a large number of readers, and the ultimate victory of a valuable first instalment of reform would be assured.

Many persons, whose opinion is entitled to respect, have maintained that as soon as a system of reformed spelling has been framed which commends itself to the judgement of philologists, it should forthwith be taught in schools, without waiting for it to obtain general acceptance or even toleration. Under present conditions, the result of this procedure would be to send out from our schools a multitude of young people who, in the opinion of their elders, would be unable to spell correctly. I cannot but think that the adoption of such a course would be a serious mistake. The introduction of an accurate phonetic notation into school use is a very different matter, and I am inclined to believe that it is in this direction that we must look for the solution of our present difficulties. It will be objected that I am proposing to add a new burden to the already too heavy load which children and teachers have to bear. But some very able teachers have given it as the result of their experience that children who are taught to read by means of a phonetic alphabet actually learn the current spelling more quickly than those who are taught in the old way; and, provided that the teacher has adequate phonetic knowledge, I see no reason why this may not be true. In the teaching of pronunciation—a branch of education hitherto too much neglected—it would obviously be a great advantage to be able to exhibit graphically the difference between what the learner ought to say and what he actually does say. But in order that it may remain efficient, the phonetic alphabet ought to be rigorously confined to its proper function of representing sounds. A serious mistake of method has been committed by many phoneticians, through failure to distinguish between two things that greatly differ—a reformed spelling for general use, and a phonetic notation intended to teach correct pronunciation and the analysis of speech sounds. Those whose aim it is to bring into use a reformed spelling (even one that is intended to be phonetically accurate) are acting wisely when they employ it in the printing of connected texts that will be intrinsically

interesting to the reader, and when they encourage their pupils to use the reformed spelling in their own compositions. The object is to render the pupil so familiar with the new orthography that he may be able to use it freely for the ultimate purposes of reading and writing—the apprehension and expression of *meaning*. When this familiarity is attained, the reader will have come to identify the words before him by their general effect, without troubling much whether he pronounces the successive letters correctly or not; and the writer will use the prescribed spelling, even though it does not agree with his own pronunciation. If he is in the habit of misplacing his aspirates in speech, he must nevertheless put the *h* in its proper place when he writes. There will be no harm in this: an orthography intended for general purposes *must* be more or less conventional. But a phonetic notation of which the representation of sound is the *ultimate* object must be treated quite differently. If it is allowed to be used for 'the apprehension and expression of meaning' its value will be greatly impaired. The learner should never be suffered to write a word in the phonetic script unless he has first pronounced it correctly. If thus restricted to its proper use, a phonetic alphabet will be a valuable aid in the teaching of spoken as distinguished from literary English. Of such teaching there has in general been very little in our schools, and this neglect has done much to strengthen the tendency, already powerful, to regard the spoken tongue as a sort of annex to the written language. It is only by sound phonetic instruction that this fallacy can be corrected. A generation of people who had learned at school to analyse correctly the sounds of speech, and to observe how far, and from what causes, the existing spelling comes short of representing the pronunciation, would certainly consider the question of reform with less of irrational prejudice and greater insight into the conditions of the problem than is at present commonly to be found.

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